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FROM THE INSIDE

# Being comfortable being uncomfortable: lessons from the dojo to the ICU

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At first glance, the art of learning to inflict harm in martial arts may seem contradictory to the "do no harm" mantra echoed throughout the medical profession. However, beneath the surface, the two share more than just blood, sweat, and tears.

I first stepped onto the tatami in 2007 and into the cage in 2008—intimidated and unsure of exactly what I was doing, it in many ways resembled my first day as a newly qualified doctor. Over the past two decades of training, I've discovered more similarities than I ever imagined between the martial arts I've studied and my work in intensive care (Fig. 1).

Receiving my black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) was, in many ways, as significant to me as earning my medical degree—and it took longer. It takes on average ~ 13 years to earn—a rollercoaster of discipline, perseverance, and constant learning. A journey that shares many parallels with medicine. And just like completing specialty training in intensive care, reaching black belt isn't the end of the journey—it's only the beginning.

## The importance of mastering the basics

In BJJ, as in many martial arts, mastering the basics is essential. Until properly learned, understood, and enacted, there's little value in attempting anything more advanced. Many of the greatest martial artists have built their style around consistently and effectively applying fundamental techniques.

Intensive care is no different. Whether a patient presents with life-threatening sepsis, major trauma, or severe acute respiratory distress syndrome, the principles of critical care remain the same. Do the basics well—hit physiological targets, instigate lung protective ventilation, prescribe appropriate venous thromboprophylaxis—because everything else depends on getting these things right.

To quote one of the greatest grapplers of all time, and the person from whom I was fortunate to receive my black belt, Professor Roger Gracie: "Jiu-Jitsu is simple—you just have to do it right." In many ways, intensive care follows the same principle.

## The importance of humility

On the path to a black belt, you will be submitted countless times. Ego has no place on the mats—it causes injury, hinders growth, and negatively impacts the training environment. The same applies in intensive care—during a difficult intubation, it's vital that a clinician know when to step aside and to ask for help. If you're unsure about how to best manage a clinical scenario, it's crucial to seek advice, speak to colleagues, and put the patient's needs above personal pride. Humility can be lifesaving.

## Losing a round doesn't mean you've lost the match

When competing, losing a round doesn't mean you've lost the match—there's a chance to come back. And losing a match doesn't end your journey—it's just another opportunity to learn. A black belt is simply a white belt who never quit. The same holds true in intensive care. A failed procedure, a "lost round", doesn't make you a failed doctor. It's a chance to reflect, grow, and come back stronger. For patients, a failed extubation attempt doesn't mean that hope is lost. It means it's time to regroup, reassess, and plan the next step forward.

## Adaptable decision-making under pressure

When faced with any opponent in martial arts, adaptability and informed creativity are what separate experts

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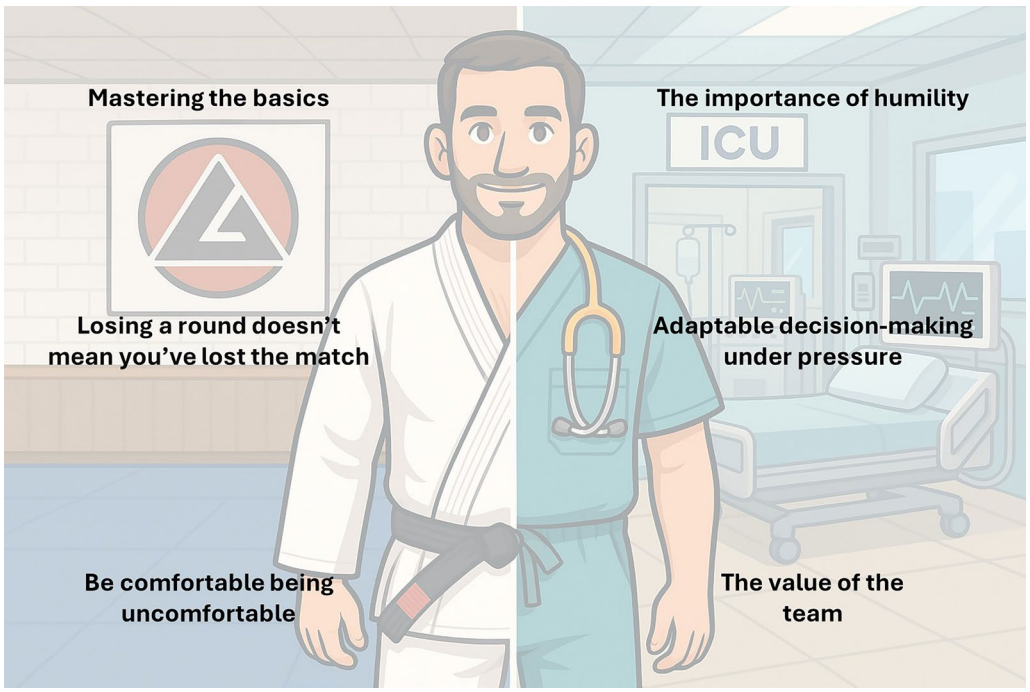
Mastering the basics
The importance of humility
ICU
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Be comfortable being uncomfortable
The value of the team

**Fig. 1** Lessons from martial arts to the intensive care unit. Image made with assistance from Copilot.

from beginners. While you may begin a match with a plan, an opponent's unorthodox style, unexpected escape, or something as small as a lost grip, can necessitate an immediate shift in approach. The avoidance of tunnel vision and incorporation of flexibility into your strategy is essential when training and competing at the highest level. Critical care demands the same mindset, whereby clinicians are required to think beyond a "one-size-fits all" approach. Even with established protocols and a clear treatment plan, unexpected complications and heterogeneity in responses to treatments inevitably occur. These occasions require flexible thinking and the ability to flow from one management strategy to the next, without being thrown. In both martial arts and intensive care, the ability to adapt under pressure can make all the difference.

## Being comfortable being uncomfortable

A key lesson in BJJ is staying calm in uncomfortable positions, whether caught in a submission or tired during sparring, progress comes from embracing discomfort. Intensive care is much the same. Long shifts, critically ill patients, and the need for rapid decision-making create a stressful environment. Growth comes from leaning into discomfort rather than avoiding it. Whether managing a deteriorating patient or facing emotional stress, being comfortable with being uncomfortable helps facilitate clear decision-making. Just as a grappler stays composed when trapped, intensive care clinicians must perform under pressure and remain present amidst demanding conditions. It's not about being fearless but recognising fear without letting it dictate your actions.

## The value of the team

An extremely important lesson martial arts teach is the value of the team. Without a training partner, there is no one to learn with; without a coach, no one to learn from; and without an opponent, no one to challenge yourself against. This community allows us to grow, push limits, and thrive. The same is true in intensive care. Our colleagues are those we depend on, and our patients are a privilege to treat. At times, the work can feel isolating, but it is only with our team that we truly succeed. And just like in medicine, not every day is a good one—injuries happen, mistakes are made, and failure is part of the process. But as Master Mauricio Gomes once told me, when things weren't so bright: "Tudo passa"—everything passes. Injuries heal, mistakes become lessons, and the hard days give way to better ones.

Whether in the dojo or ICU, resilience isn't about avoiding difficulty; it's about learning to move through it, together. Lessons from martial arts invite us to reframe each setback as part of a larger journey, fostering a broader, more reflective perspective on our work in intensive care.

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